

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE IN PARAPSYCHOLOGY: SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS<sup>1</sup>

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Some students of parapsychological history have complained of the lack of historical knowledge shown by many parapsychologists about their own field (e.g. Gruber, 1981; Rogo, 1972). This may be explained in part, as pointed out by Nicol (1973), by the enormous amount of published material which the parapsychologist would have to study in order to be acquainted in some detail with the history of psychical research, and by the difficulty in obtaining the bibliographical material necessary for such study, since most of it is found in out of print books and rare periodicals.<sup>3</sup> However, as will be discussed in this paper, a historical perspective may be helpful to parapsychologists in many practical ways.

### *Lack of Historical Continuity in Parapsychology*

There is a general lack of historical continuity in modern parapsychological literature. Many discussions of specific aspects of psi research give the impression that nothing has been done on the topic before the work of the last couple of decades. A clear example is seen in reviews of PK experiments with biological targets (e.g. Schmeidler, 1977), where nothing is mentioned before Bernard Grad's research published in the early 1960s. However, there are many studies such as Lafontaine and Picard's efforts in accelerating the growth of plants by 'animal magnetism' in the 19th century (Montandon, 1927), Favre's (1904, 1905) studies of the influence of the hand on microbes and plants, and studies of Rudi Schneider's attempts to influence bacterial cultures at a distance (Besterman and Gatty, 1934), among others, that at least deserve mention in reviews of this type of PK effect.

The same lack of historical continuity can be seen in the report of a recent experiment that attempted a physical detection of an externalization during OBEs (Osis and McCormick, 1980). The old studies of the detection of subtle bodies of Rochas, Durville and others were not even mentioned as precedents of the basic idea of the study (for a review of some of these early studies see Alvarado, 1980).

The noise reduction theory of altered states of consciousness and psi is generally presented as coming from ancient Indian meditation literature and recent research on different states of consciousness (e.g. Honorton, 1977), forgetting discussions on the subject in psychic research literature (e.g.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is an extensively revised version of an article I published in the Spanish journal *Psi Comunicación* (Alvarado, 1979). Both papers restate and extend arguments discussed previously by Nicol (1973).

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<sup>3</sup> It is not the purpose of this paper to discuss causes or solutions to this problem. However, I agree with Nicol (1973) and with White (1976) on the importance of carefully compiled bibliographical indexes of parapsychological literature to help alleviate this situation. For a review of the available indexes up to 1975 see White (1976).

Ochorowicz, 1891; Richet, 1923). As Charles Richet (1923) wrote:

In the normal state we are conscious of our existence, and of many sensations that our senses bring to us. . . . Those sensations are so numerous and so strong that other vague and confused ideas that another mysterious sense [ESP] might give us find no place. . . . Hypnosis and sleep bring to consciousness the darkness and the silence necessary to the perception of minute forces. (p. 108).

Part of this lack of historical continuity may be explained by the practical, research orientation of science. As Helson (1972) writes in relation to psychology: 'We live today in an age that cries for relevance in what one studies. . . . This point of view has little or no regard for the past . . .' (p. 115). The following are some problems that may arise from this perspective in parapsychology.

*Misconceptions.* Lack of historical continuity is responsible for many misconceptions in the field. Take for example the concept of ESP in plants, which is generally traced back to Backster's (1968) experiments. The idea, however, is older than that, as can be seen in the writings of Booth (1955) and Sinel (1927).

Some of the 'discoveries' and conceptualizations of Soviet parapsychology, as I have discussed elsewhere (Alvarado, 1978), can be seen as reformulations or a return to old concepts and phenomena of Western parapsychology if we study psychic research trends before Rhine's research. Unfortunately, many persons have been impressed by the 'revolutionary' and 'innovative' aspects of concepts and techniques such as bioplasma and Kirlian photography.

According to Pleasants (1964) the first parapsychology laboratory was that of J. B. Rhine at Duke University in the 1930s, but in March of 1907 a physician named Floris Jansen founded in Amsterdam a laboratory for the scientific study of paranormal phenomena which was active only for about a year (Zorab, 1976). Harry Price (1939) officially established in England in 1926 the National Laboratory of Psychical Research, one of the best equipped research units in the history of the field. Familiarity with the old psychic research literature may help us to correct these and many other misconceptions in parapsychology.

*Rediscoveries or reconceptualizations.* Another consequence of not being aware of our past is the repetition of research designs and conceptualizations recorded in forgotten literature. The basic ideas behind Broughton, Millar and Johnson's (1981) PK training study with aversive stimuli, Irwin's (1979) study of cognitive coding preferences and the form of spontaneous ESP, and the use of auditory targets in an ESP-OBE experiment (Harary and Solfvin, 1977), were anticipated by McElroy and Brown (1950), Bozzano (1907), and Durville (1908), respectively. However, these precedents were not considered in the design of the above mentioned studies.

I am not criticizing the work of modern researchers, which certainly is creative and well done (and this applies especially to the investigators mentioned in this section). My point is that the work of current parapsychologists may be facilitated by increased attention to the literature of the past which is relevant to the problems of the present.

#### *Relevance of the Past to Present Concerns*

Of what practical use can be the historical approach to modern parapsychol-

ogical research? This section will discuss several perspectives that I hope may give an answer to the question.

*Reinterpretation or use of old data in a new context.* According to Watson (1966): As new ideas are introduced a heretofore neglected, isolated point, not part of the contemporary picture, may need to be rescued from oblivion. A fact, not part of the present pattern, may take on new significance when seen in the context of a new theory. We cannot know of these points without historical knowledge (p. 66).

An example of this are the analyses of spatially reversed responses of old telepathic experiments (e.g. Myers, 1885, p. 44; Warcollier, 1938), and observations with mediums such as the effects that Morselli noticed with Eusapia Palladino where 'the medium, usually left-handed, became right-handed at one sitting, and Morselli himself became left-handed' (Lombroso, 1908, p. 378), some of which have been reinterpreted in the light of the fairly recent study of brain hemispheric differences (e.g., Broughton, 1975; Ehrenwald, 1977).

Mattuck's (1979) 'thermal noise theory' of PK, which predicts decreases in temperature in the vicinity of PK events, may be evaluated considering old studies that attempted to correlate temperature drops with telekinetic phenomena (e.g., Price, 1973; Winther, 1928).

*Reanalysis of old data in terms of present interests.* The past can also be useful in the present through the reanalysis of old data. An excellent example is that of White's (1964) survey of old ESP experiments in terms of mental strategies of subjects to obtain ESP impressions, which is generally considered to have influenced the modern trend of psi tests during internal attention states. Roll's (1966) important paper on ESP and memory relationship played a similar role in the case of ESP and memory studies.

Recent statistical analyses of old data dealing both with spontaneous and experimental ESP studies present interesting findings in terms of modern interests (Schouten, 1979; Schouten and Kelly, 1978).

*Evaluation of specific phenomena and areas of psychical research.* The usefulness of history in parapsychology can be clearly appreciated when it is seen that there is no way of avoiding the past when we want to study and evaluate in a comprehensive way issues and phenomena such as survival of death and poltergeist manifestations, as can be seen in some excellent reviews of those topics (Gauld, 1977; Gauld and Cornell, 1979).

In order to acquire an informed opinion about the so-called macro-PK effects, as pointed out by Braude (1981), it is important to study the old physical mediumship literature. Studies done with mediums like D. D. Home (Crookes, 1874), Eusapia Palladino (Carrington, 1909), Stanisława Tomczyk (Ochorowicz, 1909), and Stella C. (Price, 1973), among others, should be required reading in this context.

In summary, we have to study our old literature in order to know something about basic problems and questions of current parapsychology.

*Formulation of hypotheses.* A literature so voluminous as that of psychical research can certainly provide a rich resource of hypotheses to be tested in future studies.

Several observations suggest that it is possible to willfully influence at a distance communications received at spiritualist séances (e.g., Turvey, 1969). These observations, as well as others of 'telepathic hypnosis' (Myers, 1886), and of persons that created apparitions of others or of themselves at a distance by concentration (e.g. Gurney, Myers and Podmore, 1886, Vol. 1, pp. 102–109, Vol. 2, pp. 671–676), suggest ways to study interesting psi phenomena and to explore the active agent telepathic model from different points of view.

The relationship between bodily weight and table levitations may be investigated in the context of recent group PK studies (Batchelder, 1979). Crawford (1918) noticed that the weight of his medium Kathleen Goligher increased by the weight of the levitated table, although a small percentage of the weight was taken by other members of the mediumistic circle. Similar studies could be tried with better methodology and apparatus than Crawford used.

A forgotten line of research that should be explored further is the influence of thyroid conditions on ESP performance, since there are indications of a possible relationship (e.g., Drake, 1938; Riess, 1937).

*Analysis of opinions and evaluations.* Knowledge of parapsychological history not only is useful for research purposes, but also to evaluate discussions about different topics.

Gauld's (1968, Appendix B) critical analysis of Hansel's (1966) discussion of the mediumship of Mrs. Piper, where several distortions of basic facts are pointed out, is a good example of this application.

L. E. Rhine (1967) wrote referring to PK studies before the 1930s that 'none of the claims were sufficiently validated that even the more careful psychic researchers took them very seriously' (p. 239). Dr. Rhine does not define what she means by 'the more careful psychic researchers', but many students of physical mediumship will describe in such a way investigators like Everard Feilding, Hereward Carrington, Fritz Grunewald, Gillaume de Fontenay, Julian Ochorowicz, and many others that were convinced of the reality of the phenomena of some of the physical mediums of their times.

*Study of parapsychology's development.* According to J. B. Rhine (1953): 'The value of history does not consist alone in the more obvious guidance it affords to the present course of action; its retrospective outlook is also essential to any fair appraisal of the progress being made' (p. 247). This can be clearly appreciated in L. E. Rhine's (1971) review of conceptual and methodological developments of laboratory ESP and PK research, and in Ian Stevenson's (1977) review of the development of survival research, where the historical perspective shows us why and how parapsychology has developed methods, techniques and concepts to deal with specific areas of psi research.

The writings of Insua (1979), Mauskopf and McVaugh (1980), Mackenzie and Mackenzie (1980), and Moore (1977) are good examples of attempts to understand the development of parapsychology as a scientific field of research through the historical study of its pioneers and social dynamics.

### *The Limits of History*

This paper has discussed several ways in which the historical perspective can be useful in parapsychology; however, it is also important to be aware of its limitations. As Thouless has said: 'Although . . . historical research can

contribute something useful to parapsychology, I think an excessive preoccupation with it can deflect interest from experimental work' (in L. E. Rhine, 1970, p. 267). Our present problems will not be solved just by looking into the past. We should not affirm, for example, that a historical study of physical mediumship may give us complete assurance and knowledge of the nature of telekinesis and ectoplasm, as some authors seem to believe (e.g. González Quevedo, 1971). The old studies present valuable indications or data to support hypotheses or tentative generalizations, but there are many things we still don't know about those phenomena that should be explored by further empirical research designed in such way as to present the possibility of falsifying our expectations.

New findings or observations may bring changes of interpretation or of opinions attained by historical studies.<sup>4</sup> This happened to Rogo (1976), who wrote about OBEs:

When I travelled to Durham in 1973 [to participate in OBE experiments with Blue Harary at the Psychical Research Foundation] I had some pretty set views about the OBE. Not only had I read just about everything there is about the subject, but I also had had my own personal experiences with it. Yet within one week of working with Blue Harary my entire view about it collapsed and I had to rebuild a new model and concept. (p. 190).

As seen in this paper, historical perspective can help us to understand and develop current interests and necessities, but the present may also give meaning and use to the past. Discussing this 'double' use of history E. H. Carr (1966) wrote:

Learning from history is never simply a one way process. To learn about the present in the light of the past means also to learn about the past in the light of the present. The function of history is to promote a profounder understanding of both past and present through the interrelation between them (p. 86).

Perhaps this perspective may help us to reach and develop new insights and points of view useful to current parapsychological concerns.

<sup>4</sup> This shows the importance of keeping history in a proper perspective to avoid inhibition of creative thinking or constrains of points of view to specific problems.

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